The Development of Early Taverns in Alexandria

by James C. Mackay, III

Editor's note: This article is an abridged version of a Master's degree thesis by James C. Mackay, III on eighteenth-century taverns. Following the article is an excerpt on the Alexandria Fire of 1855, provided by Ashton N. McKenney.

On a hot early spring day in 1755, a young widow stepped ashore in a small shipping community in Virginia, the edge of the civilized world. She had just spent over four months crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the ship *London* with her servant, her brother, and his fellow junior officers in the British Army. The entire party was en route to Fort Cumberland, an outpost on the upper reaches of the Potomac River, following General Edward Braddock and his troops who had been sent from England to expel the French from the Ohio Valley. The young widow was a "Mrs. Browne" (first name unknown) and the little town was named Alexandria, although in her diary she referred to it by an earlier local name, "Bellhaven."[1]

To call Alexandria a town in 1755 took some imagination, since it had been little more than a tobacco landing six years before. Mrs. Browne spent her first day roaming about in search of a place to stay, finally settling for a small empty room "little larger than to hold my Bed, and not so much as a Chair in it." Despite the humble accommodations, Mrs. Browne was glad to be on land again, having felt like "a Prisoner" in the close confines of the *London*. The next ten weeks would be reasonably uneventful, as her brother and his comrades awaited supplies and transportation to continue their journey, but Mrs. Browne managed to make some new friends and went visiting in the surrounding countryside and over the river to Maryland. On Sunday June 1, 1755, the group pushed on to the west in a caravan of 12 wagons, with hers bringing up the rear, and there is no evidence that she ever returned to Alexandria.[2]

Mrs. Browne's account illuminates some of the difficulties that a traveler experienced

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during this period, even though she was escorted by her brother, a person of some rank and standing. When the *London* arrived in Hampton Roads, the gentlemen on board proceeded to get drunk, a situation that must have been uncomfortable for her as a respectable lady. Going ashore to walk a bit and have dinner cost her more than seven shillings, close to a week's pay for a skilled man. Even after finding a place to stay in Alexandria, she was not allowed to bring her baggage ashore and spent yet another night on the ship. After a month and a half in her spartan lodgings, possibly one of Alexandria's earliest taverns, she was moved to another part of the building to make "Room for the Soldiers to drink Cyder and dance jiggs in." Her servant stole some personal items from her and had to be discharged and replaced, a situation made even more difficult because labor was at a premium. After leaving Alexandria she bounced along in a wagon for 12 days on the road to Fort Cumberland, deluged by thunderstorms, plagued by ticks and sleeping poorly. Arriving at the fort on June 13th, she recorded wearily: "I was put into a Hole that I could see day light through every Log, and a port Hole for a Window; which was as good a Room as any in the Fort."[3]

Though the information in Mrs. Browne's journal is scanty, the document is significant as the earliest surviving travel account by an Alexandria visitor. Unfortunately, many of the difficulties and hardships that eighteenth-century travelers endured would change little over the next several decades. By modern standards, travel at this time remained excruciatingly slow and hazardous. This was caused by numerous factors, among them the means of transportation available, bad roads that were poorly marked and scattered, loosely regulated accommodations.

Although Alexandria may not have measured up to Mrs. Browne's expectations, the town would grow rapidly during the next half-century and its ability to lodge and entertain visitors would similarly improve. Two men identified as ordinary-keepers were among the first to buy lots while Alexandria was in its infancy and during the next decade, over a dozen other people obtained tavern licenses in town. By focusing on the way that these taverns operated, the goods and services that they offered to the public, and the numerous ways in which they changed, we can see a more down-to-earth side of everyday life in colonial and early federal Alexandria that is often missing from other social histories of the period. Nearly everyone used taverns for a variety of purposes in eighteenth-century America, making them a great crossroads of experience for people from different social classes and backgrounds. This study uses Alexandria taverns as the kaleidoscope through which many images of eighteenth-century life in that community may be viewed.

Mrs. Browne was certainly not the first person to travel to one of the more remote corners of the world, and her experiences in colonial Virginia had been shared by many before her. One of the first things that the reader notices about travel in the eighteenth century is the amount of time that it took to get anywhere. For centuries, overland travel had been a slow and arduous undertaking. People and goods moved on land at essentially the same speed from prehistory through man's use of domesticated draft animals and wheeled vehicles, into the early nineteenth century, when railroads provided the first significant advance in land speed. By the mid-1800s, it was possible to move at a rate faster than that of a galloping horse, until then the fastest means of land transport. Since that time, improvements in the rate and comfort of travel

have occurred with such speed that there are still many people living who had to make the adjustment from the earlier rail era to the modern one of jet aircraft. Travelers in the eighteenth century, however, were sharing most of the same experiences and traditions of travelers from earlier centuries. A journey of even a relatively short distance required extensive prior planning such as the meals to be eaten along the way, food and rest for one's horse, and a place to spend the night.[4]

In colonial Virginia, overland travel was slowed by the fact that there were few roads. Early in the seventeenth century, the House of Burgesses had directed that "highwayes" be laid out wherever they would most benefit the population and supported new road construction in nearly every session.[5] By the 1750s, roads had been established along older trading routes connecting agricultural regions in the east and the west with their tidewater entrepots. A map surveyed by Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson and printed in London in 1755 shows few principal roads in the colony, though many other small roads and trails must have connected most communities. The heaviest concentration of routes at mid-century was in the more populous eastern and tidewater counties of Fairfax, King George, King William, and James City, while a few major roads also linked Alexandria to Fredericksburg and both of these towns with Winchester at the head of the Shenandoah Valley. Philadelphia was joined to the Valley of Virginia by "The Great Waggon Road."[6]

One reason often given for the lack of good land transportation in Virginia is the ease of travel by water. The tidewater region possesses many navigable waterways that were a blessing to the planters who settled along their banks. Prior to the 1730s, many of them used their own wharves to load their

hogsheads into small boats or "flats," floating them out to waiting ships which eventually returned carrying merchandise from England. Water transportation for most goods was simply faster and cheaper than land transport, subjected the freight to less damage, and no doubt retarded the construction of roads through the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[7]

An important Virginia tobacco inspection act in 1730 improved the quality of the leaf that was exported by requiring planters to ship the tobacco first to a public warehouse, where government agents examined the crop and destroyed any of low quality. This change in procedure put much more pressure on existing land and water transportation routes to the newly established inspection points, one of which was located just north of Great Hunting Creek on the future site of the town of Alexandria. Though water transport was still preferred where it was available, many new "rolling roads" were constructed after 1730, over which the hogsheads were actually rolled or carried by carts and wagons. Additionally, by mid-century, many people lived beyond the "fall line" which separated the tidewater region and its navigable water from the piedmont's fertile valleys and steep mountain hillsides. The demands of these new settlers for good land routes is reflected in the extensive network of roads that was shown on maps by the late-eighteenth century.[8]

The fact that these routes appeared on a map as principal roads meant very little; to the contemporary traveler they could still be a nightmare. As Mrs. Browne and her brother made their way toward Fort Cumberland, she frequently noted the "Extreem bad roads" which occasionally "obliged [her] to walk." At one point, "[t]he Roads were so bad that the poor Horses were not able to keep on their

Legs." Four of the party's wagons broke down within two days while Mrs. Browne gamely "walked as far as I was able." The next day, when the exhausted group was only two hours from the fort, three more wagons broke down. The trip left Mrs. Browne bedridden with "a Fever and other Disorders" for ten days. A combination of horrible conditions and having to drag wagons over the terrain caused her party to average no better than about 12 miles daily.[9] By way of comparison, sixteen-year-old George Washington rode on horseback through similar country seven years earlier, often making forty miles per day, and Ebenezer Hazard rode the 168 miles from Alexandria to Williamsburg in only eight days in 1777, a rate of twenty-one miles per day.[10]

The means of land travel available were also limited and depended on one's personal wealth. Walking was the slowest, most physically tiring means available and allowed the least amount of baggage to be carried, but it cost nothing. Horses were ridden by and generally accessible to all but the poorest people, while packhorses often accompanied those who did not travel lightly. Carts and wagons, though commonly used to transport goods overland, were usually not employed for passenger travel by anyone capable of owning a riding horse. Of the passenger vehicles, two-wheeled riding chairs were the cheapest and most numerous, although affluent colonists used many different types of coaches.[11] Many wheelwrights, coachmakers and harnessmakers can be found among the skilled craftsmen in colonial Virginia's towns, particularly as their residents prospered. By the late 1740s, travelers in some Tidewater areas who possessed neither horse nor carriage could take advantage of early public transportation, as early stagecoach lines had been established in Williamsburg and Caroline County by that time. This service

will be examined in more detail later since it was primarily a development of the post-Revolutionary period around Alexandria.[12]

As travelers moved through Virginia by whatever means available, they constantly sought food, drink, rest and entertainment at one of the many taverns scattered about the countryside and in the colony's small towns. Taverns and social drinking were institutions that came to Virginia with her earliest colonists and were an integral part of most English settlements. Barely a decade after the founding of Jamestown, the first Virginia assembly passed legislation to control public drunkenness, an inauspicious start to the history of taverns in English America. While a large portion of their trade depended upon travelers, these early taverns also served a local clientele, particularly in town, where they were usually the only establishment in the neighborhood licensed to retail liquors by the drink or in other small quantities. By the end of the colonial period, a person traveling between America's towns and settlements could find a variety of available accommodations, from the small, rough, one-room "ordinary" near a wilderness ferry to the more elegant, well-furnished urban inn equipped with a ballroom and billiard table. Taverns provided sustenance to the hungry and thirsty, rest for the weary and entertainment for a society that thoroughly enjoyed its diversions.[13]

On his first trip to the Shenandoah Valley in 1748, teenager George Washington experienced both ends of the tavern spectrum in one forty-eight hour period. Tired after a long day in the saddle, Washington looked forward to some rest upon reaching a little tavern in the valley and had eagerly gotten into bed:

when to my Surprize I found it to be

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nothing but a Little Straw-Matted together without Sheets or any thing else but only one thread Bear blanket with double its Weight of Vermin such as Lice Fleas [etc.] I was glad to get up (as soon as [the] light was carried from us) I put on my Cloth[e]s and Lay as my Companions.

Though he vowed to spend the rest of his nights sleeping outside by a fire, his experience the next evening was much more pleasurable when the group arrived in "Frederick Town" (later Winchester, Virginia)

return'd to our Lodgings where we had a good Dinner prepar'd for us Wine and Rum Punch in Plenty and a good Feather Bed with clean Sheets which was a very agreeable regale.[14]

More than thirty years later, the Marquis de Chastellux traveled about in similarly remote parts of western Virginia and still found considerable variation in available lodging. One particularly isolated ordinary "consisted of a little house placed in a solitary situation in the middle of the woods, notwithstanding which we there found a great deal of company." The French nobleman found the accommodations simple but adequate, consisting of "one large room for the whole company, with a blanket for each individual," an arrangement that was "sufficient for such hearty countrymen . . ." Occasionally Chastellux and his companions took advantage of local hospitality, staying once with a planter named Lambert and again with "Captain Muller, who, like Mr. Lambert, does not keep a public house, but willingly receives the few travellers who pass by this unfrequented road."[15]

Almost fifty years after Mrs. Browne's

appearance in Alexandria, female travelers still faced similar inconveniences and hardships. Traveling by stage coach appears to have left little room either for feminine grace or masculine gallantry. Englishman John Bernard wrote that, in climbing into the vehicle, "the last-comers, men or women, had to stride over the shoulders of the earlier ones to reach a seat . . ." Bernard happened to be traveling with his wife, and the pair unfortunately found themselves among the "late-comers."

When Mrs. Bernard and myself were at last established in the extreme seat . . . we discovered that the floor was lumbered with a mail-bag and a valuable assortment of earthen and hardware jugs, kettles, fire-irons, and other articles consigned to a "store" in the interior, which had the effect, before the vehicle had been ten minutes in motion, of dyeing our shins all the colors of the rainbow.

On other occasions, women benefitted from gentlemanly companionship. Julian Niemcewicz characterized the typical situation simply in his journal: "You have to sleep in a room where there are 5 or 6 beds. You pay often the women's share." Robert Hunter, Jr.'s stage coach was delayed one morning "in

A typically crowded bedchamber at a tavern.

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waiting for Mrs. Hasenclever;" on another occasion, he wrote that "Mrs. Parks of Baltimore is under our care."[16]

Early in the eighteenth century, Virginia could be characterized as a colony with few towns or settlements of any size, inhabited by many tobacco planters who had made themselves largely self-sufficient on their tidewater farms.[17] By mid-century, however, numerous river towns had sprung up throughout the region to serve as communication and shipping points for the planters and to support the increasing numbers of settlers who were pushing into the Virginia Piedmont. Yorktown, Urbanna, and Dumfries in Virginia and Piscataway, Bladensburg, and Port Tobacco in Maryland are examples of those communities that started as tobacco inspection points in the 1730s (following the act mentioned earlier) but grew with increased travel and trade. Most of them also became important shipping points and store locations for the representatives of Scottish and English mercantile houses, which purchased most of the local tobacco. Alexandria can certainly be counted among these towns, built around a collection of tobacco warehouses and quays known locally as Belhaven. By 1749, when Alexandria was officially established, its founders envisioned a prosperous town that would serve those in the interior of Virginia as well as the region's tobacco growers.[18]

From its earliest days, Alexandria depended upon good transportation. By 1721, a tobacco warehouse had been constructed approximately one mile north of Great Hunting Creek to hold the area's cash crop, and roads stretched away from it back into the woods. Sufficient numbers of planters and traders were coming and going by 1745 that Hugh West began to operate a tavern or "ordinary" along with his nearby ferry. The

1750s saw the little village grow into a regional trading center, though it remained little else: the church was downriver, the courthouse was a two-hour ride into the countryside and most of the town fathers lived elsewhere.[19] Like most other colonial American towns, it was a community in which most necessities were relatively close and in which many people of different economic standing worked and lived close together. One historian, writing of eighteenth-century Philadelphia, provides us with a fairly generic sketch that could characterize Alexandria, as well.

> The city, in short, was small in scale, small in the scale of its enterprises, and largely lacking in the specialized areal homogeneity that would later come to characterize large parts of the modern metropolis. Work took most people only a short distance from their homes, to proprietorships and small partnerships almost invariably identified on store- and shop-front signs by the names of their owners. Within their homes and workplaces people were close to the streets, and often on them, and the streets themselves reflected the variety of homes, stores, and workshops that rose only two or three stories above them.[20]

Alexandria matured quickly. The original act that created the town included a requirement that all lot buyers build a house on their property within two years. Not only were all 84 lots snapped up within four years (fast by colonial standards), but most of the buyers met their obligations to build. We might imagine early Alexandria, like other new colonial settlements, as a rather chaotic place with few rules, penned animals or even street

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names, but it seems to have had a purposeful, focused nature. Perhaps, owing to its founding and growth as a trading town, too many people had too much to do for energies to be wasted idly or unprofitably, though the numbers of taverns which existed in the town suggest otherwise. Court records indicate that the town was relatively peaceful and free from serious crime, benefitting from its small size and the natural deference of eighteenth-century Virginia society.[21]

By the 1760s, Alexandria had become a place to travel **to**, not just travel **through**. Several merchants were located in town, including those who were factors for large companies in Scotland and England such as Glassford and Henderson from Glasgow and the Whitehaven firm of Dixon and Littledale. Skilled craftsmen had begun to collect along the major thoroughfares, offering some ready alternatives to imported merchandise. A mixture of quite a few taverns and a growing population also made for an improved social life for all of the town's residents.[22] Important economic changes occurred in the community as more and more of the area's planters shifted from tobacco to the production of foodstuffs, such as cereal grains like wheat and corn. The large-scale cultivation of wheat rather than tobacco had several benefits. Less labor was required to grow it, fewer acres were needed for a profitable crop, and the plant itself did not deplete the soil as did tobacco. Wheat was also a commodity that everyone consumed, particularly planters in the Caribbean with hundreds of slaves and little land on which to grow their own food. Before the American Revolution, wheat, corn and flour had replaced tobacco as Alexandria's major exports.[23]

This wheat boom was reflected in the physical growth of the town during the 1760s. In the fall of 1762, the House of Burgesses officially enlarged Alexandria, authorizing the sale of an additional fifty-eight lots around the perimeter of the original community. Offered in the spring of 1763, all but five of the lots sold on the first day! The removal of the earlier clause which required owners to build on their lot within two years no doubt boosted the sales, since it made property more attractive to speculators, and the end of hostilities with France that same year must have promoted a feeling of confident optimism.[24] The continued success of the community helped to spur growth and attract additional investment; in short, taverns and other businesses thrived in Alexandria.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the tavern business in Alexandria underwent some significant changes that reflected the growth and increasing maturity of the community. Competition for customers was much more intense in towns, where establishments were closely located to each other and usually served similar segments of the population with many of the same services. As colonial urban societies grew, becoming more diverse and more stratified, taverns themselves diversified to better serve an increasingly complex society. In the larger towns and cities, taverns became purveyors of food and drink of many different kinds, from the grog shops and "eating houses" that served sailors and laborers along the waterfront to the inns and coffee houses patronized by merchants and the community's elite.[25]

Taverns in smaller towns were slower to acquire such stratification. What Mrs. Browne saw in Alexandria in 1755 was typical of the accommodations that most people found in colonial American towns. All licensed taverns offered food, drink and a place to sleep, though in differing degrees of

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quality. The better places might offer particularly nice stables, more expensive tablewares, a large room for balls or assemblies, French wines, a billiard table or horses and vehicles for hire. The differences apparent in Alexandria taverns before the American Revolution, both in the services offered to customers and in the way the tavern keepers perceived and advertised their businesses, became much more pronounced in the decades following independence. After the Revolution, as the young nation grew and prospered, more Americans began to travel for business or pleasure, often joined by Europeans who wanted to see for themselves what the great democratic experiment was all about.

As the country matured, Alexandria's taverns did too. In 1792, John Wise built a large, four-storey tavern that even modern travelers would recognize as a hotel, complete with dining rooms, an elaborate ballroom and bedchambers fitted with modern coal-burning fireplaces. This "City Tavern and Hotel," as it
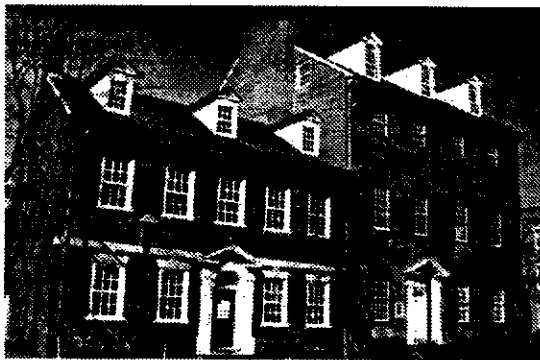
Now Gadsby's Tavern, this tavern was once the "City Tavern and Hotel" operated by John Wise.

was known, symbolized a new era in Alexandria's lodging industry and illustrates the summit of a more extensive tavern hierarchy that had developed by the end of the century in towns like Alexandria. Between the community's founding in 1749 and the

second decade of the nineteenth century, we can see this process unfold.

Just as it would continue to be an important transportation center throughout the rest of the century, so too would Alexandria be inhabited by tavern keepers in ever greater numbers. By 1800, there would be dozens of establishments serving food and drink to weary travelers, providing lodging to both man and beast and hosting a wide array of entertainments. The services that one could expect in a tavern or "hotel," as some came to be known during this period, changed significantly between Alexandria's founding in 1749 and the turn of the nineteenth century. By 1810 it is possible to detect a hierarchy or stratification that had formed among the various taverns, oyster houses and other food service businesses. Where once a tavern's clientele experienced more similarities in food, lodging and amenities, by the nineteenth century there appeared a larger gap between what was offered to a gentleman and what was available to one of humbler station. As Alexandria grew and became more sophisticated between 1749 and 1810, the community's taverns did likewise.

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To learn more about Alexandria's taverns, visit Gadsby's Tavern Museum, located at 134 N. Royal Street, 703/838-4242.

1.Fairfax Harrison, ed., "With Braddock's Army," <u>Virginia Magazine of History and Biography</u> 32, no. 4 (October 1924): 306-307. Apparently, Mrs. Browne's use of the name "Belhaven" to refer to the little community that later became Alexandria followed contemporary local practice. The year before her arrival, merchant and town founder William Ramsay had received a letter from trading partners in Barbados who addressed him as a "Merchant in Belhaven." (Ramsay Papers, Smithsonian Institution) As late as 1759, the Reverend Andrew Burnaby recorded in his diary that he had "returned down the river about sixteen miles to Alexandria, or Belhaven . . ." Andrew Burnaby, <u>Travels Through The Middle Settlements in North America in the Years 1759 and 1760</u> (1798; repr., New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1970), 69.

2.Harrison, ed., 305-310.

3.Ibid., 310-316.

4.Daniel J. Boorstin, <u>The Discoverers</u> (New York: Random House, 1983), 116-125.

5.William W. Hening, ed., <u>The Statutes At Large</u>, (Richmond, 1822; reprint edition, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), 13 volumes, 1: 192.

6.Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson, <u>A Map of the Most Inhabited part of Virginia</u> (revised 1755 edition), published in London by Thomas Jefferys, 1775, Gadsby's Tavern Museum, Alexandria, Virginia.

7.Arthur Pierce Middleton, <u>Tobacco Coast</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1984), 113.

8.Ibid., 113-114, 135-141; H. R. McIlwaine, ed., <u>Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia</u>, 1727-1734 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1910), 57-59; Hening, 4:268; Abraham Bradley, Jr., <u>A Map of the United States</u>, 3rd edition, 1796, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Bradley's thorough map recorded post and stage roads, post offices, official ports of entry and Indian villages along with a detailed chart showing distances between them.

9.Harrison, ed., 315-317.

10.John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., <u>The Diaries Of George Washington 1748-1799</u> (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925), 4 volumes, 1: 3-11; Fred Shelley, ed., "The Journal Of Ebenezer Hazard In Virginia, 1777," <u>Virginia Magazine of History and Biography</u> 62, n.4 (October 1954): 400-423. The mileage for Washington's and Hazard's trips was taken from the mileage table on the Fry/Jefferson map, information provided by John Dalrymple for the 1755 edition.

11.Land and personal property tax records for Alexandria in 1787 list 14 riding chairs and 2 chariots as the only fine vehicles in town; the same records taken two years later show 19 chairs, 3 phaetons or stage wagons (recorded together) and 4 coaches or chariots (also recorded together).

12.Colonial craftsmen of many types, including those in the vehicle trades, are discussed in Carl Bridenbaugh, <u>The Colonial Craftsman</u> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950). The best summary of American stagecoach development from the colonial period to the Civil War is Oliver Holmes and Peter Rohrbach, <u>Stagecoach East</u> (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983). The first colonial line they can document ran between Boston and Newport, R.I. in 1716. For Virginia lines, see Ralph E. Fall, "Mr. J. Woolfolk's Stagecoach Line," <u>Virginia Cavalcade</u> (Summer 1977): 21-29.

13.Kym S. Rice, <u>Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers</u> (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1983), 19-21. Rice's book, done to accompany an exhibition at Fraunces Tavern in New York City, is the finest comprehensive study of American taverns done to date. See also Edmund S. Morgan, <u>American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia</u> (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 111.

14.Fitzpatrick, ed., <u>Diaries of Washington</u>, 1:3-6.

15.The Marquis De Chastellux, <u>Travels In North America In The Years 1780, 1781, 1782</u> (1827; repr., New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1970), 222, 258-259.

16.John Bernard, <u>Retrospections Of America 1797-1811</u> (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1887; repr. Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 1985), 33-34; Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, <u>Under Their Vine And Fig Tree: Travels through America in 1797-1799, 1805 with some further account of life in New Jersey</u>, trans. and ed. Metchie J.E. Budka (Elizabeth, N.J.: The Grassmann Publishing Company, Inc., 1965), 31; Robert Hunter, Jr., <u>Quebec to Carolina in 1785-1786 Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London</u>, eds. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1943), 163, 176.

17.The Reverend Hugh Jones, traveling in Virginia in 1724, wrote that the local people "are not forward in. . . the making of particular places, every plantation affording the owner the provision of a little market. . ." Hugh Jones, "The Present State of Virginia" quoted in Rhys Isaac, <u>The Transformation Of Virginia</u> (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 15-16.

18.Middleton, <u>Tobacco Coast</u>, 50-51; James D. Munson, "From Empire To Commonwealth: Alexandria, Virginia 1749-1780" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, 1984), 117.

19.Elizabeth Hambleton and Marian Van Landingham, eds., <u>A Composite History of Alexandria</u> (n.p.: Alexandria Bicentennial Commission, 1975), 7; Munson, "Empire," 2, 116.

20.Stuart M. Blumin, <u>The Emergence Of The Middle Class</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20-25.

21.Thomas M. Preisser, "Eighteenth-Century Alexandria, Virginia, Before the Revolution, 1749-1776," (Ph.D. dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 1977), 41, 48; Eric H. Monkkonen, <u>America Becomes Urban</u> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 41-42; Preisser, 170.

22.Ibid., 165-166.

23.Ibid., 114; Munson, "Empire," 29-30, 172.

24.Ibid., 168-169, 180; Preisser, 193-195.

25.Rice, 31.

The Tragic Alexandria Fire of 1855

Courtesy of Ashton N. McKenney

October 8-14 is National Fire Prevention Week - a fitting time to remember how much more of a threat fire was to our ancestors who had fires going every day for heating and cooking, and who lived without the benefit of sprinkler systems, 911 calls and quick-responding fire departments with high-powered equipment. Alexandria was devastated by an incident of arson in November, 1855, which caused a tremendous amount of damage and killed seven of the City's volunteer firemen. A memorial to the firemen was designed by artist Thomas McClelland and erected in 1856 inside the entryway to Ivy Hill Cemetery. Following is the report from the Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser *two days later:*

Incendiary Fire - Awful Calamity - Destruction of Human Life

Saturday last was a sad day in Alexandria. The cheerless aspect of the day accorded with the feelings of our citizens. A great calamity had happened and the sternest wept at the spectacle they were forced to behold. We have never known our whole community to be more deeply affected.

In the dead hour of night on Friday night - about 12 o'clock - the City was alarmed by the cry of fire. It was soon found that smoke and flames were issuing from the third story of the large brick warehouse occupied as a china store by J. T. Dowell on the north side of King Street, between Fairfax and Water [now Lee] Streets. Upon entering the house it was seen it had been deliberately fixed in several places - candles, wick saturated with camphor and trains of gunpowder leading to the crates being found.

The incendiary had prepared for a speedy and sure destruction of the building and its contents. He had left nothing undone to effect his full purpose. The firemen and citizens soon assembled in large numbers, and worked with the greatest energy and perseverence, to arrest, if possible, the progress of the flames. They succeeded to a great extent. The large wholesale drug store of Reel and Stevens, adjoining, in the upper story of which building is the office of the Southern Churchman, was saved. Many of the goods of Reel and Stevens were moved - and there was some damage by breakage - but their loss is not great. The churchman office was not materially injured. The frame buildings on the west side, belonging to the estate of Mrs. Stewart, were also saved. The fire thus, confined to the building in which it originated, the firemen redoubled their exertions to save as much of it and its contents as possible. The large stock of china, glassware, etc. - however, amounting in value to some $16,000 or $18,000, was almost wholly destroyed, and the interior of the building burned out completely. The building was owned by James P. Smith. The goods were insured, we believe for some $20,000: in the Fire Insurance and Potomac offices of this City, and in the Albemarle of Charlottesville, and the Mutual of Richmond. The building was also, insured in the Mutual Insurance Company of Richmond for $6,500.

And now, we have to record the most melancholy part of this sad affair. About 4 o'clock, on Saturday morning, while the fire was raging in the upper part of Mr. Dowell's store, a large number of citizens, several of them members of the Star Fire Company, were at work in the interior assisting in attempting to extinguish the flames. At this moment the west gable wall of the warehouse fell in with a tremendous crash, bursting through the second and first story floors, Killing Seven of our valued and respected citizens and wounding

several others. A cry of horror rose at this catastrophe. The stoutest hearted quailed under the suddenness and fearfulness of the calamity.

Measures were immediately taken to rescue the bodies from the ruins, and to see who were dead and wounded. Those exertions continued until about 11 o'clock, on Saturday morning, when the last body was found. It was then ascertained who the unfortunate victims were, and this is the list:

Mr. George Plain, who was in the upper part of the building holding a hose pipe in his hand when the accident occurred.
Mr. Robert I. Taylor, Pavior.
Mr. John A. Roach. He was taken out alive, but expired in a few hours.
Mr. James W. Keene, who has been engaged in selling wood near the railroad depot.
Mr. William S. Evans, Plumber.
Mr. J. Carson Green, son of Mr. Edward Green.
Mr. David Appich, a son of Mr. Gotlieb Appich, Confectioner.

Besides those killed, there were several citizens quite severely wounded. Messrs. Francis A. Marbury, Richard K. Stone, William H. Lambert, Charles J. Wise and David Williams, were bruised and hurt and narrowly escaped death, and John Dogan, a colored man, was buried in the ruins but was subsequently dug out, without being seriously injured.

As the bodies were successively brought from the mass of burning materials, the most intense grief was exhibited by the hundreds assisting in the melancholy duties of the occasion. The victims were all much bruised, burnt and mangled. The remains were carried to the homes of the deceased, followed by weeping crowds. And, ah! Who can paint the desolation of those homes! Who can tell the grief of the bereaved widows, the fatherless children - the affectionate fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. Mr. Plain, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Roach, Mr. Keene and Mr. Evans were married men with families. The other victims were young men in the

pride and prime of life. When their epitaph is written let it be - "They died at the post of danger and of duty."

Profound grief reigned over this city. The calamity was so sudden and severe, that it seemed as if the citizens could scarcely realize its horrors. Business stopped its wheels - and the most careless were brought to reflect seriously on such a melancholy event. What must be the feelings of the incendiary - if he has a human heart in his bosom?   *November 19, 1855*

The newspaper also carried a poem written by someone identified only as "Harold," commemorating the lives of the seven firemen and their noble sacrifice:

The City lay all quiet, like an infant in its nest.

While slumbers soft had soothed the pangs of many a care-warn breast;

Deep silence reigned, and naught was heard throughout the gloom profound.

Save here and these the footfall of night's guardians on their round.

The bell had told the midnight hour, and still this same, repose.

Presided o'er each weary couch, repressing earthly woes;

Unconscious, in the arms of sleep, each silent dreamer lay,

While thoughts of insecurity were banished far away.

But hark, amid this settled calm is heard a sudden cry.

And soon from voice and deep-toned bell, the slanting tidings fly;

When, springing from their downy beds, the

noble Firemen haste.

Resolved with manly energy, to stay the burning waste.

They reach the spot, and battle well with the devouring flames;

While angels plead in women's forms, for blessings on their names;

And gallantly they met the foe, still conquerors in the fight.

They see those raging waves of flame, succumbing to their might.

Each felt a thrill of pleasure, as he resurveyed the scene,

Unthinking that some darker woe perchance might intervene,

To man the heartfelt ecstacy that dwelt in every breast,

As they beheld those frightful flames 'twixt towering walk compressed.

But, O! an agonizing cry now bursts upon each ear,

And draws from many a manly eye, an overflowing tear;

For like the flash from smitten steel or lightning through the sky.

A horrid crash reveals to all, a frightful tragedy.

Hearts that were stout, now quailed before the ruin fate had made.

And lips unused to gentle words, and honest prayer essayed -

As one by one the names were called, of those who slept beneath

That ponderous mass, encircled by the iron gasp of death.

There lay the forms of those we knew, and loved and loved, and honored too.

The father, husband, brother, friend, whose hearts were warm and true.

Snatched from the fond embrace of those they held on earth most dear.

Whose love reciprocal they prized as fervent and sincere.

Nobly they fell, and nobly too, responsive hearts proclaim!

Undying honors to their worth, and blessings on each name -

And when long years have passed away, recorded there shall stand,

The deeds and noble daring of this firm, heroic band.

Peace to their ashes, as they lie beneath the quiet sod,

Reposing in the tender arms of a forgiving God!

Affection ever will delight, their virtues to recall,

And deprecate the fiendish act, that caused their mournful fall.

Harold

The previous excerpt from the local newspaper was provided by Ashton N. McKenney, member and company historian of The Relief Truck and Engine Company No. 1 of the Alexandria Fire Department.

For more information about America's volunteer fire companies during this period, see Cause for Alarm: The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City *by Amy S. Greenberg [Princeton, 1998].*

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